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# Bulletin of The Detroit Institute of Arts of the City of Detroit

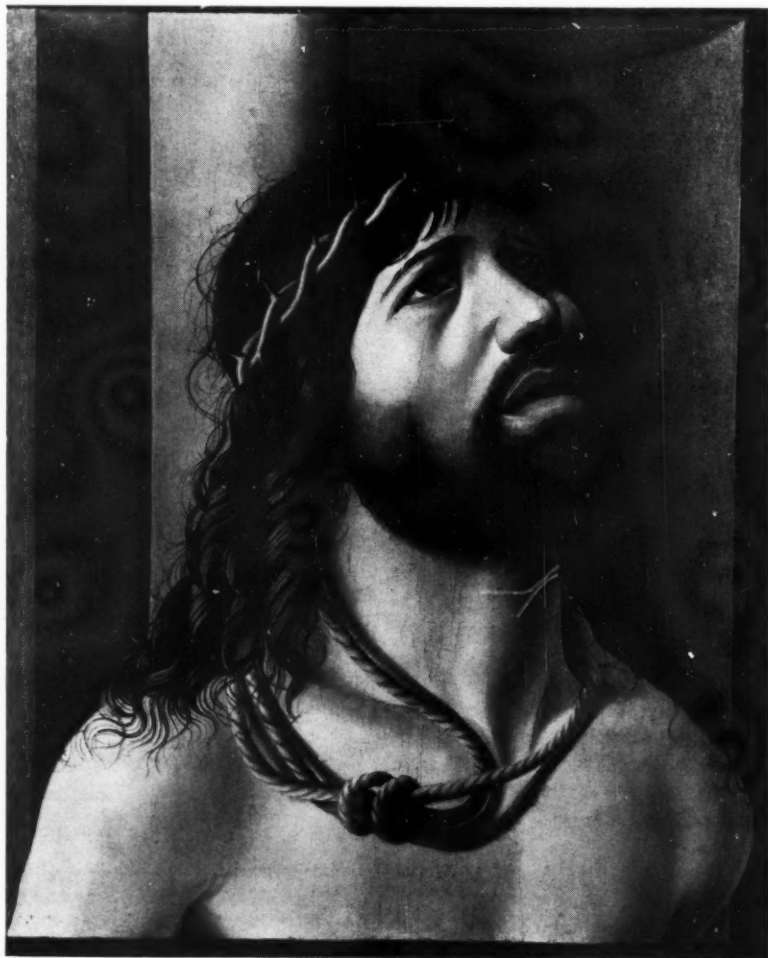
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CHRIST AT THE COLUMN

ANTONELLO DA MESSINA. C. 1430-1479

PURCHASED FROM THE RALPH H. BOOTH FUND

## CHRIST AT THE COLUMN BY ANTONELLO DA MESSINA

Only a great master is able to combine simplified, almost abstract form with the strongest psychic expression. An outstanding example of such an accomplishment is the Museum's recently acquired painting by Antonello da Messina, made possible by the Ralph H. Booth fund. No one can withstand the effect of these painfully contorted eyes, this moaning, open mouth; the sight of the rope which fetters the noble body so brutally to the column, the crown of thorns entangled in the beautiful reddish curls.

This content of inner feeling is brought to greatest effect by the strong contrasts of light and the plasticity of form thus produced; in addition to this, an enamel-like technique, a luminous, transparent surface, makes the picture seem a precious thing, in keeping with the sacred subject.

The uniting of the soft forms of the nude human body with the hard lines of stone architecture has always been a difficult problem, the handling of which has seemed naturally suggested to the southern artist, where conditions of nature provoke the observation of this contrast. Antonello has solved the problem perfectly, by reducing man and architecture to simple cubic forms, and by giving to the body cylindrical shapes which are repeated in the column and the niche behind. The roundness of the column, the half-round of the niche correspond to the rounding of the head and neck and the convex shape of the projecting shoulders and upper arms. At the same time, the ascending lines of the architecture give added effect to the uplifted glance of the eyes of the Christ.

The impression of monumentality is heightened by the narrow space in which the picture is confined. The broadly unfolding form is enframed by the narrow wall panels which terminate the niche at either side, and together with the light



FIG. 1  
PIETRO DA SALIBA  
VENICE. ACADEMY

circular termination above define the shape of the niche. The figure is enframed below by the narrow balustrade, over which the plastic forms of the breast of the Christ seem to protrude.

One may well believe that the deeply thought out and strongly felt composition must have exerted an extraordinary influence. L. Venturi, to whom is due the rediscovery of the painting, regards the conception as the earliest one of this theme which the master painted—about 1470—and believes that the artist himself painted the smaller composition of the Cook collection in Richmond which shows only the head and differs in details—in the treatment of the hair and beard and the addition of the thorns and drops of blood—in the last years of his life, when he had increased the expression of pathos and had carried his realism still farther. He points out that two repetitions were done by Antonello's nephew, Pietro da Saliba, the paintings in Buda-

pest and the falsely-signed one in the Academy in Venice (Fig. 1 and 2). Both show how quickly the spirit forsakes the form when the creator who invented the form has disappeared.

Antonello da Messina belongs to the most remarkable and significant artists of the fifteenth century in Italy. He is a painter who does not quite fit in with any school but who exerted a strong influence in the south as well as in the north. He is known to everyone as the artist who is supposed to have brought oil painting from The Netherlands to Italy. Although it is by no means likely that Antonello was in The Netherlands, and although with a few masters the oil technique had already replaced tempera painting in Venice several years before his arrival in that city, there is no doubt that Antonello played a part in the dissemination of the oil technique in Italy and in introducing Netherlandish painting to the southern artists. His pictures, particularly his masterly portraits, attract more attention than most contemporary works by their extraordi-

nary power of light treatment and transparency of color, and show an excellent and carefully worked out technique which is indeed related to that of the Netherlandish primitives.

It was probably with these works that he first became known in Naples, where about 1450 he was the pupil of a prominent artist, Colantonio, who worked there at the court of René of Anjou, where he became enthusiastic about the Netherlandish paintings of this art-loving ruler. We do not get our information regarding this apprenticeship period from the records but from a letter which an esteemed scholar, Summonte, wrote in 1524 to a friend in Venice, to whom he communicates his investigations regarding the beginnings of the Neapolitan school.

From the documents we learn that Antonello was born about 1430 in Messina as the son of a sculptor and that he was married in that city in 1455. From 1457 to 1465 he was engaged in work for churches in Reggio-Calabria and Messina. Then we hear nothing more of him for eight years, except that we know two dated pictures from this period, the blessing Christ in the National Gallery of London (1465) and the *Ecce Homo* of the Friedsam collection of the Metropolitan Museum (1470). In 1473 and 1474 Antonello is again active in Messina and other places in Sicily. It was at this time that he executed the splendid *Annunciation* in Syracuse. It was not until August, 1475, that he appeared in Venice, where he executed the famous altarpiece of S. Casciano which is preserved in fragments in the Museum of Vienna and which was to exert so strong an influence upon Venetian painting, notably with masters like Alvise Vivarini and Cima da Conegliano. In the following year the Duke of Milan, Galeazzo Maria Sforza, called him to Milan. Shortly afterward, however, he is again mentioned in Sicily, where in 1478 he closed still another contract for an altar in a church in Messina, dying in



FIG. 2

PIETRO DA SALIBA

BUDAPEST NATIONAL MUSEUM

February, 1479, while still a comparatively young man.

Antonello's portraits, such as those in the Metropolitan Museum (Altman bequest), *Il Condottiere* (1475) in the Louvre, the so-called self-portrait in the National Gallery, the two portraits (one dated 1474) in the Kaiser Friedrich Museum in Berlin, and the one in the Villa Borghese, belong to the most impressive and striking creations of the Early Renaissance. He was also extraordinarily successful as a painter of Madonnas, as we can see by the S. Casciano altarpiece and the Benson Madonna of the Mackay collection which was rediscovered by Berenson. Along with this he especially likes to depict the tragic motives of the Christian legend. He painted certain subjects more than

once, in the different phases of his development: St. Sebastian, whose representation in Dresden is perhaps his masterpiece; the Crucifixion, which he depicted in three small pictures in his early period (Hermanstadt) and again toward the end of his life (1475 Antwerp; 1478 London); the *Ecce Homo*, now as a bust picture seen from the front (Piacenza 1473; Friedsam collection 1470), now as Christ at the Column (our picture), again as a pietà held by angels (Academy, Venice). In these last groups the Museum's composition forms an important link, which is of significance for the knowledge of the artist's development and at the same time a work which transmits the strongest impression, such as every timeless masterpiece creates.

W. R. VALENTINER.

## TAPESTRIES BY PEETER WAUTERS

In memory of Russell Alexander Alger, Mrs. Russell A. Alger has presented to the permanent collections the two tapestries which for some time have adorned the large hall as a loan. This gift but adds to the civic benefactions of the Alger family. The Muncacsy painting, *Last Hours of Mozart*, was given by Mrs. Henry D. Shelden, Russell A. Alger and Frederick M. Alger. Older citizens will recall General R. A. Alger, who served his country in the Civil War, as Governor of Michigan, as Senator, and as Secretary of War under McKinley. His family has carried on with generous spirit his fine tradition of public service.

In the border of one tapestry is woven the name of Peeter Wauters, a member of an old family of weavers—a Paul Wouters was dean of the Brussels guild in 1569-70. Soon after this date the

family appears to have divided, one branch continuing at Brussels, the other settling at Antwerp, a city so experienced in international trade that already in the fifteenth century an exchange was created, the *tapesiers-pant*, with warehouses and shops for storage, display and sale of tapestries. Here, around 1675, flourished Peeter Wauters, of whose activities the records are all too scant. All we know is that he sold in 1677 a set of six tapestries dealing with the story of Masinissa, and at a Paris auction in 1907 there appeared the two tapestries which were later acquired by Mr. and Mrs. Alger. Another contemporary member of the family was M. Wauters, whose tapestries of the Dido and Aeneas story are well known.

The two tapestries are typical for the late Flemish Baroque style, and are in excellent preservation. Both show views

of parks with wide perspective; the subject is indicated in medallion cartouches as *Le Trot*, a cavalier trotting, and *Croupades par le droite*, curvetting practice. The small figures are characteristic of the change in taste and fashion towards the end of the seventeenth century; they mark the breaking away from the heroic sized figures of Rubens and his follower Jordaens, towards a more purely decorative treatment.

#### LE TROT.

On a high stepping chestnut gelding whose mane is dressed up with red ribbons tied into bows, at slow trot a cavalier is approaching across the terrasse. He is dressed in very ample breeches of light green silk and a green coat which shows the white undersleeves of fine muslin; his cravat is tied at the back into a long, flowing bow, the white turban is adorned with an aigret. His features are probably intended to portray an Oriental. His long whip is raised in salutation to a young woman who stands beneath a garlanded arch. Her dress of pale rose silk is looped up over a white underskirt, a pale blue shawl is wrapped around her shoulders, a huge blue hat, trimmed with pink ostrich feathers, balances rather precariously on her dark curls. She is escorted by a man dressed in the Oriental fashion in flowing white trousers and bejaboted shirt, over which he wears a brown mantle which matches the color of his turban; like the horseman, he wears huge spurs to his boots. A third Oriental, this time a boy, follows as a page another young woman, clad in an amber toned dress, who carries a basket of flowers. If the tapestry were a hundred years younger, if it belonged to the late eighteenth instead of the late seventeenth century, we would call it an illustration to Mozart's delightful opera, *The Elopement from the Seraglio*, and the two ladies would be Constance and Elmire.

However, we do not find ourselves in a seraglio, for the landscape is not Ori-

ental at all, with its elaborate ornamental parterres, its fountains and statues in conventional classisistic style, with the far view into the depth of the park. The Oriental congeries are simply a concession to the taste of the period, a taste fostered by the diverse East India Companies which were established in Holland, England, France, Denmark, Scotland, Spain, Austria and Sweden. Textiles especially were imported in large quantities: silks and, even more important, painted Indian cottons which appeared first about 1660 and in time led to that great industry of French "indiennes" which in turn were copied practically all over Europe. These "perses" and "indiennes" interfered seriously with the tapestry trade, so much so that the designers of tapestries were forced to pander to popular taste. In our tapestries the costumes are not truly Oriental, but patched together of pieces which might be purchased in any East India shop, in any Western city. The effect is delightful, it has a fairy-tale quality.

#### CROUPADES PAR LE DROITTE.

A riding lesson is in progress on the wide terrasse at the back of a palace. A young boy, dressed in leather breeches and coat, is putting his bay horse through the paces, curvetting to the right, as the inscription is at pains to inform us. His brown hair, his red sash flutter and billow out in the quick motion.

Another, slightly older boy, seated very straight on his roan mount, is waiting for his turn to show off. The horse's mane of extraordinary beauty—a mantle of hair almost like Lady Godiva's—the saddle of Spanish leather and the saddlecloth with appliqué embroidery in the Indo-Spanish mode, the young man's exquisite simplicity of attire, all mark him as the scion of a noble house. The parents, obviously proud of their sons, stand in the arched doorway, watching the curvetting practice directed by a riding master, while a groom is looking



CURVETTING PRACTICE. TAPESTRY BY PEETER WAUTERS

FLEMISH. XVII CENTURY

PRESENTED BY MARION JARVIS ALGER IN MEMORY OF RUSSELL ALEXANDER ALGER

on. We are reminded of the riding school paintings by Velasquez where the King and Queen watch their son, Don Balthasar Carlos, four years old only, yet seated calmly like a grown-up on his fat black pony. All these people are dressed in the fashion of the day, but a man standing near the riding master has dressed up in Oriental garb, wearing brown breeches with long flounces of, probably, Mechlin lace, a blue sash, green mantle, brown and green turban with a jewel stuck in at the front and a long red ostrich plume dangling over from the back. The vista of the park is far more open and elaborate than in the companion piece.

We do not know who designed the cartoons for these charming tapestries, although we recognize the young horseman at curvetting practice. He is adapted from one of the cartoons which Jacob Jordaens had designed for "Les Grands

Chevaux," a famous set of tapestries describing the riding lessons of Louis XIII, the dauphin of France, then thirteen years old, the son of Henry IV and Marie de Medici. Jordaens made his cartoons in the years between 1645 and 1651; the set was woven at least three times and was repeatedly copied. Peeter Wauters' cartoon painter is not a copyist; he simply adapted this special figure from the Jordaens set because it was so handsome, spirited and absolutely fitted for his purpose.

The splendidly baroque borders contribute largely to the festive spirit of the tapestries. At either side slender candelabra grow out of sturdy consoles, a heavily framed cartouche occupies the center of the top. But this mathematically precise frame is almost smothered beneath heavy garlands of fruits and flowers, garlands which dangle from the rams' heads of the stone pedestals, wind





CAVALIER TROTTING. TAPESTRY BY PEETER WAUTERS  
FLEMISH. XVII CENTURY

PRESENTED BY MARION JARVIS ALGER IN MEMORY OF RUSSELL ALEXANDER ALGER

round and round the candelabra, and hang in riotous festoons along the upper border. The lower border is given over to a display of martial trophies; pieces of accoutrement, shields, helmets, breast-plates, gloves, spurs are thrown together in harmonious disorder with swords and daggers, drums and trumpets, while flags and pennons bring strong accents of bright color into this display of cold steel.

Peeter Wauters does not rank among the greatest tapestry weavers; his establishment must have been relatively small. Yet in these tapestries he shows the true spirit of the regal craft; he does not, like so many of his contemporaries, attempt to rival wall paintings, but has produced works of pure decoration of the highest order.

ADELE COULIN WEIBEL.

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## CALENDAR OF LECTURES AND EXHIBITIONS

## EXHIBITIONS

January 10-February 28. Paintings by Frans Hals.

(Gallery talks on the Frans Hals Exhibition Wednesdays, Thursdays, Fridays, and Sundays at 3:00 p. m. and at 8:00 p. m.)

## TUESDAY EVENING LECTURES

January 22, 8:30. "Culture of the Greek World after Alexander," by Professor Rolf Johannesen, of Wayne University.

January 29, 8:30. "Art of the Greek World after Alexander," by Adele Coulin Wiebel.

February 5, 8:30. Dr. Mehmet Aga-Oglu will tell about his recent trip to the Near East.

February 12, 8:30. "The Rise of Democracy in Art," by Edgar P. Richardson.

## FRIDAY EVENING LECTURES

Beginning February 1, 8:30. Series of six weekly lectures on the Appreciation of Sculpture.

## GALLERY TALKS

(Tuesday afternoons at 3:00 and Thursday evenings at 8:00)

January 22 and 24. Gothic Art in the North.

January 29 and 31. Italian Gothic Painting and Sculpture.

February 5 and 7. Flemish Painting in the Middle Ages.

## WORLD ADVENTURE SERIES

January 20, 3:30. "Birds, Bergs, and Kodiak Bears," by William L. Finley.

January 27, 3:30. "Where the Strange Trails Go Down," by Colonel E. Alexander Powell.

8:30. "The Eskimos as I Know Them," by Peter Freuchen.

February 12 and 14. Painting in Florence and Siena.

February 3, 3:30. "Miracles in Nature," by Arthur C. Pillsbury.

February 10, 3:30. "Old Bill Laughs at Europe," by Captain Bruce Bairnsfather.

## GARDEN CENTER

January 17. "Trees," by Professor Ethel Chase, of Wayne University (illustrated).

February 7. "Flower Arrangements," by Mrs. Henrietta Carey (illustrated), read by Mrs. Beresford Palmer.

## FOR BOYS AND GIRLS

January 19. "Mosques of the Mohammedans."

January 26. "The Dark Ages in Europe."

February 2. "Gothic Cathedrals."

February 9. "Master Painters of Flanders."